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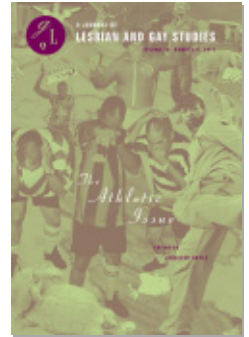
## Deliberate Breaks: Evoking Trans Imagination for Just Futures

**Now**

Dan Irving

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## DELIBERATE BREAKS: EVOKING TRANS IMAGINATION FOR JUST FUTURES NOW

Dan Irving

*Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics,  
and the Limits of Law*

Dean Spade

Boston: South End Press, 2012. 246 pp.

Dean Spade's much-anticipated book is a rich tapestry of critical inquiry, interventions into legal and transgender studies, and strategies for transformative resistance. Spade's uncompromising analysis of interlocking regulatory systems illuminates the socioeconomic dynamics of power. His work is poised to empower readers to challenge bureaucratic "population-level interventions" (123) legitimizing colonization, post-9/11 manifestations of the neoliberal security state, and the escalating economic disparities resulting from exploitative regimes of wealth accumulation that shorten the lives of the "forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularized, and the unimaginable" (33).

In *Normal Life* Spade cultivates a trans method that draws from the experiences of nonnormatively sexed and gendered individuals including racialized, disabled, queer, and impoverished subjects in order to engage in ongoing conversations among critical scholars and social justice organizers. He asserts that the way trans subjects embody, experience, and challenge their impossibility is invaluable to resisting contemporary neoliberal society where one's intelligibility as human and subsequent life chances are rooted in whiteness, hetero/homonormativity, nationalism, and middle-class professionalism.

Influenced by Foucauldian theorizations of biopower, Spade works meticulously through three case studies—state-issued identification, sex-segregated facilities, and health care—to expose the "myths of legal equality" (116). He demonstrates how these arenas of administrative governance abet vast discrepancies in the distribution of life chances resulting in the "premature death" (144) of many within queer, racialized, nonnormatively sexed and gendered populations.

Critiquing administrative law and its inconsistent implementation among levels of government and between states, Spade argues that legal reforms are sig-

nificant to transformative efforts to construct more equitable societies. Administrative law impinges on the lives of vulnerable and marginalized communities daily, Spade declares; therefore, the legal system cannot be approached as some abstract realm requiring experts with the appropriate credentials. Legal professionals are required to defend those imprisoned, facing deportation and death, as well as to render the content of administrative law accessible to those whose survival such policies threaten. Nevertheless, such knowledge must be utilized to empower criminalized and impoverished people so they may participate and play leadership roles in building transformative movements (180–83). Furthermore, he argues, legal interventions must exceed the capacity of systemic colonial, nationalist, and capitalist power—legal campaigns must demand the impossible (e.g., abolish prisons, redistribute wealth equitably) (209).

Spade confronts LGBT organizations that privilege rights approaches to the law (124–26). These organizations pursue individual discrimination cases to validate identities and direct resources toward enshrining “gender identity” in human rights law and achieving “hate crimes” legislation. Spade stresses that such approaches to legal reform perpetuate the epistemic and corporal violence that harms and increasingly inflicts death on the most vulnerable sectors of society. Individual valorization of identity through anti-discrimination laws reifies systemic power relations and legitimizes misunderstandings of the state as a neutral arbitrator capable of administering justice. Additionally, such approaches interpolate social movements within the governing logics, producing the effects they oppose.

Spade’s argument pivots toward existing community-based social justice organizations (e.g., the Miami Worker’s Center and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project). He demonstrates how they employ the “four pillars of social justice infrastructure,” including the pillars of policy, consciousness, service, and power (180), to politicize members of vulnerable communities, engage in capacity building, and cultivate political imaginaries that dare to supersede the possible.

The strength of *Normal Life* lies in Spade’s commitment to accessibility as a matter of political and ethical principle. This principle is evident in the way Spade skillfully articulates theoretical concepts in common parlance, enabling critical trans politics to inform political struggles beyond the academy. Moreover, his concrete discussions of administrative governance and transformative political interventions position radical change within our reach rather than demarcate it to the realm of speculative futures.

Another strength lies in Spade’s nonidentitarian approach to trans politics (160). Trans works on two registers throughout the text. It refers those with non-normative sexed embodiments and gender identifications. It also highlights how

categories of sex and gender mediated by race, sexuality, ability, and class regulate everyone, albeit in different ways: for example, individuals living in poverty are often dismissed as not being “legitimate” men or women. With this double register, Spade is able to advance arguments for issue-based coalitions that confront the administration of normative life.

Spade’s insistence that the law be used strategically to force interlocking systems of power to their limits is an astute and timely argument in the wake of socioeconomic crises that create the impetus to turn toward radicalism on *both* ends of the political spectrum. *Normal Life* confronts fallacious arguments, often taken for granted by critical scholars and organizers, that colonialist capitalist and heteronormative systems of power offer solutions to the decline of life chances for an increasing number of people.

A few concerns arose from my engagement with the text. Spade’s terse discussion of the value of symbolic recognition (90) and his arguments for refusing individual validation do not acknowledge the significant psychic investment that marginalized trans subjects often have in achieving recognition of their identities, and the ways that such desire propels engagement with state bureaucracies.

Additionally, while Spade stresses the need to employ legal reform to expose the limits of power and mobilize vulnerable populations, there is a slippage on a couple of occasions between whiteness, colonialism, and class as governing *systems* and white, middle-class individuals *themselves* (30, 114). Amid neoliberal competitiveness and zero-sum mentalities that produce “ressentiment” from which critical scholars are not immune, the individualizing logic we scrutinize needs to be avoided.<sup>1</sup>

While Spade warns of “founders’ syndrome” (192), I am also concerned that social justice organizations can misrecognize their own insular cliques as imagined communities of activists. Judging from his emphasis on enacting principles of the future society within which we seek to live, I have no doubt Spade will continue to offer inspiring scholarship that engages with such critiques.

## Note

1. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

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